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Bonus miles for biggest Utah freeway job

Utah County » The \$1.1 billion I-15 project will extend to Spanish Fork.

By Brandon Loomis

Reconstruction of Interstate 15 in Utah County will provide traffic relief all the way from Lehi south to Spanish Fork instead of stopping in Provo as expected, the Utah Department of Transportation announced Wednesday.

The state has chosen Provo River Constructors for the job, awarding the consortium led by Fluor Enterprises and Ames Construction a \$1.1 billion contract for the 24-mile job. Total cost, including rights of way for the expanded lanes, tops \$1.7 billion.

Word that by 2012 Spanish Fork will get new lanes and interchanges thrilled officials in the southern Wasatch Front suburb.

"This is the best Christmas present that could ever be given to our city," Mayor-elect Wayne Andersen said in a written statement.

City Manager Dave Oyler said a new interchange at Main Street will especially help, because rush hour traffic backs up badly on the narrow street under the freeway.

Provo River beat out two other teams: one led by Kiewit Western and another led by Flatiron Constructors, Skanska USA and Zachry Construction.

Each of the construction bidders offered unique sets of freeway improvements for the same fixed price, and UDOT decided it got the most from Provo River. Among the consortium's key advantages were a project that extends farthest, a couple of miles beyond the U.S. Highway 6 interchange to 6800 North in Spanish Fork, a completion date a full year ahead of the competitors and a projected 40-year concrete life compared to proposals for 20 to 30 years.

"All three proposals really took it even further than we expected," UDOT spokesman Nile Easton said. "This one just really stood out as beating our expectations."

The winning team includes local contractor Wadsworth Bros., and Ralph L. Wadsworth Construction, a local company bought by Texas-based Sterling Construction this month. Fluor and Ames also have Utah subsidiaries.

Before the bidding, highway officials had expected the project to run at least from American Fork to Provo.

The contractors will add at least two lanes in each direction -- in some places three, counting auxiliary lanes between interchanges -- for the length of the project. That means the northern reaches will have five or six general-purpose lanes each way, with the six-lane segment stretching from Orem to Lehi. South of Provo, the freeway will grow from two lanes to three in each direction.

Crews will rebuild 10 interchanges.

Construction is expected to begin in March or April and end in 2012 -- two years earlier than UDOT had expected before the bidding.

During most of the construction period the builders will retain the existing number of open lanes, building new ones beside the current road and shifting traffic to them as the old lanes are rebuilt, said UDOT project spokeswoman Heather Barnum. Still, there will be occasional lane restrictions.

At its peak, the project is expected to employ 1,000 to 2,000 workers.

Aside from being Utah's priciest-ever contract, it's also the state's first attempt at a "fixed-price/best design" project that challenges bidders to stretch dollars and offer the best value for a predetermined price. Missouri was the first state to try it and has reported big savings.

Provo River Constructors used innovative interchange designs and an aggressive schedule to keep both traffic and construction flowing continually and stretch its budget, according to consortium project director Tuhr Barnes. It then poured the savings into a thicker concrete pavement expected to add years to the road's life. It should serve traffic for up to 40 years, he said, compared to about a seven- or eight-year window for repaving on the existing asphalt surface.

Barnes touted his firm's design of a Provo Center Street interchange in particular, reducing costs significantly and making traffic flow better for the next 20 years.

That Center Street interchange will have continuous traffic flows, UDOT project director Dal Hawks said. Such innovations and the long projected pavement life helped win the project, he said.

"They really provided a great overall value," Hawks said.

As for getting so much more than originally planned: The poor national economy didn't hurt. Highway departments across the country are seeing dollars go further as contractor competition for work increases, Hawks said.

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I-15 in Utah County

Built in the 1960s, the freeway carried about 140,000 vehicles a day past its busiest points when UDOT counted in 2007. Growth projections peg the number at 238,000 vehicles by 2030. The department originally wanted to rebuild and widen the freeway for 43 miles from Sandy to the Juab County line, but that would have cost more than \$5 billion. The Legislature bonded for \$1.725 billion, and UDOT opted to see what contractors could do with it.